



News Release

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Overdose deaths from prescription pain meds drop 27 percent

Several key initiatives credited, including Prescription Monitoring Program

OLYMPIA — Fewer people in Washington died from prescription pain medication overdoses between 2008 and 2012, after an eightfold increase in the last decade. The overdose death rate dropped by 27 percent and the number of deaths went from 512 in 2008 to 388 in 2012; this was tempered by an increase in heroin deaths, which rose from 146 in 2008 to 231 in 2012.

Most prescription pain medications contain drugs known as opiates or opioids. These powerful drugs are potentially addictive. Prescriptions written for these medications have increased dramatically since the late 1990s, leading some to misuse and abuse them. Some who became addicted to prescription opioids have transitioned to heroin, because it's cheaper and more readily available, especially in non-urban areas.

In the past three years, the Department of Health created new prevention tools to help health care professionals and consumers. These include pain management rules for health care providers and the Prescription Monitoring Program, which helps providers see what meds patients are getting.

“We continue to make steady progress on the prescription end, so it appears that these initiatives are helping,” said Lisa Hodgson, acting director of the Office of Health Professions and Facilities. “Despite the increase in heroin deaths, the goal is safe use of pain medications while preventing addictions. We continue developing strategies to prevent opioid deaths. Health care providers play a crucial role helping patients manage pain medications safely and get addiction treatment when necessary. Growing use of the Prescription Monitoring Program helps.”

The Prescription Monitoring Program is a secure online database that allows prescribers to see all prescriptions for controlled substances that their patients are receiving. Health care providers can look for duplicate prescriptions, potential misuse, drug interactions, and other concerns.

Pain management rules for health care professionals who prescribe pain medication include guidance for using opioid-based medications to manage chronic, non-cancer pain. These rules encourage practitioners to become better educated for safe and effective use of these drugs.

Among prevention strategies, the state health department will work on expanded access to naloxone this year. Naloxone is a powerful opioid overdose antidote that [health care professionals can prescribe](#) for those at risk of an overdose.

Patients using opioid medications should keep them in a secure place and never share their medicines with others. Always follow the label directions and consult with your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns. Taking these powerful drugs with alcohol, other prescription or illegal drugs can be dangerous and possibly deadly. If you are concerned about overdose prevention, discuss with your health care professional whether a prescription for naloxone is appropriate.

Properly dispose of unused or expired prescription medications. Several [drug take-back-your-meds programs](#) exist across the state, including several pharmacies, police and fire departments and [other locations are easy to find](#) in many communities.

The [Department of Health website](#) (doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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